

CITY OF BELLEVUE
EASTGATE/I-90
CITIZEN ADVISORY COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

May 19, 2011
5:30 p.m.

Bellevue City Hall
Room 1E-112

MEMBERS PRESENT: Lindy Bruce, Dave Elliott, Jay Hamlin, Jeffrey Hummer, Mark Ludtka, Tom Perea, Rob Pucher, Rachel Solemsaas, John Stokes

MEMBERS ABSENT: Carrie Courter Blanton, Tom Bohman, Francois Larrivee, Jim Stanton, David Vranizan, Cynthia Welti

STAFF PRESENT: Franz Loewenherz, Transportation; Mike Bergstrom, Dan Stroh, Planning & Community Development; John Owen, Makers Architecture and Urban Design

RECORDING SECRETARY: Gerry Lindsay

1. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 5:41 p.m. by Co-chair Hamlin who presided.

2. Visual Preference Survey – Report on Responses

Senior Planner Mike Bergstrom said there were close to 300 responses to the visual preference survey. He pointed out that the respondents were not given the opportunity to explain their favorable or unfavorable reactions to the photos. However, conclusions can be drawn from what ended up on the favorable side and what ended up on the unfavorable side. The conclusions in the summary report represent the interpretations of the staff based on their observations.

Mr. Bergstrom said the document will be released to the public very soon.

3. Draft Alternatives – Review of Changes

Co-Chair Hamlin reminded the Committee members that at their May 5 meeting the staff and consultants presented draft alternatives for review. Three working groups were formed, one to focus on each of the three alternatives. The feedback provided by the CAC was used by staff and the consultants to modify and further develop the alternatives.

Mr. Bergstrom said a fair amount of work had to be done following the May 5 meeting to dimensionalize the alternatives. The revisions made to the alternatives were framed by the CAC input, the market realities, transportation issues, the existing land uses on the ground and the realities of redevelopment economics, environmental characteristics, and community vision.

The conclusions reached were that there is a market demand for between 1.2 million and 1.5 million square feet of office, 1800 housing units, and 200 new hotel rooms; there are

opportunities for start-up and research and development uses, along with partnerships with Bellevue College, in Richards Valley; there is potential for residential and retail development on the campus of Bellevue College; and redevelopment of the Factoria mall would help to keep the corridor strong. Primary challenges identified were the environmental characteristics of the area; the current land use patterns; and the limited road capacity.

The existing conditions inventory highlighted the fact that most of the buildings in the corridor were constructed within the last 20 to 30 years and are still in good condition. As such, they can be expected to remain usable for many years.

The city's approach to improving traffic flow and overall mobility has traditionally been focused on strategically adding capacity, operating roadways more efficiently, and managing demand and providing choices.

Planning Director Dan Stroh noted that the Committee on May 5 expressed an interest in how the ideas on the alternatives maps might be expressed in terms of form and building density. He stressed that in thinking about those issues, however, the Committee should refrain from reaching any conclusions about floor area ratios (FAR) or specific densities; that will be the topic for a future meeting.

Mr. Stroh explained that outside of the downtown, the city has for many years had a maximum FAR of 0.5, with few exceptions. For example, the newly adopted Bel-Red subarea plan allows for a significant departure from that historical stance. The area in Factoria where T-Mobile is located was developed with an FAR in excess of 0.5 prior to incorporation into the city. The 0.5 limitation was intended to focus the higher intensity growth in the downtown, thus creating a well-defined city center. The highest FAR in the downtown is 8.0 and the lowest is 3.0. For the downtown, and under the new Bel-Red subarea plan, there is a base FAR and a maximum FAR; to exceed the base FAR, developers must contribute to the bonus system. The maximum FAR in the Bel-Red corridor is 4.0, which can only be achieved through providing certain amenities.

There is no direct correlation between FAR and building height. A parcel containing 40,000 square feet of land area, and having an FAR of 2.0, could support a building containing 80,000 square feet. That building size could be accommodated in a number of ways, including four floors at 20,000 square feet each, or eight floors at 10,000 square feet each. The latter, of course, would require a building that is twice as tall. The average height of the T-Mobile buildings is 75 feet; they appear taller because they are constructed on a steep slope. The FAR for that development works out to 1.26. The FAR for the five-story Sunset Corporate Campus is 0.48. The Advanta development buildings are 70 feet tall and, based on the entire original site area, the FAR is 0.5. The Plaza Center West building in the downtown is a nine-story structure but has an FAR of only 1.75, whereas the 112th @ 12th building is only six stories tall but has an FAR of 2.7.

Height is always a sensitive issue; the public often equates building height to increased density. From an urban design perspective, height should be used judiciously in select locations where it fits with community character. Taller buildings have direct impacts relative to views, light and glare, shadows, and wind effect. The perceptions of people about place are strongly influenced by building height. Good urban planning takes into account the topography of an area and makes it possible to discern the rise and fall of the land; sometimes highrise buildings can accentuate the natural topography. Planning sensitively for taller buildings is important to avoid having them appear to be randomly and arbitrarily situated.

Ms. Bruce asked to what extent the city has the tools to say that for a particular site the FAR should be one number, and for another site the FAR should be another number, all with an eye on limiting building height. Mr. Stroh said the city acts to define a zoning pattern across contiguous areas, with clear and predictable parameters. Property owners know up front what they can do with their properties.

Mr. Stokes said giving consideration to community character is intriguing but asked how it would be determined. Mr. Stroh agreed that community character is somewhat of an amorphous concept in many ways, yet people will express strong opinions regarding it. He said it can be thought of as community vision which tends to be steeped in history and existing context. Of course, over time areas evolve. It is unlikely that taller buildings and more density would have been acceptable in the Bel-Red corridor 20 years ago. Mr. Ludtka suggested that fastest and best way to effect change will be to increase land values beyond where they are currently. That will encourage a new cycle of development and redevelopment. Change should come holistically and create an environment that has desirable characteristics and amenities. The Eastgate area in its current configuration lacks the elements needed to make it a holistic neighborhood. He added that if taller buildings were permitted, there could potentially be more land area opened to other uses that would benefit the area.

Mr. Stokes agreed. He suggested that community character should refer to more than just building height, such as the type of buildings, density, and community amenities.

Mr. Elliott remarked that the development community is likely to be very cautious about doing anything for the next five to ten years. Things are still trending downward in terms of vacancies and companies going out of business. Unless they see an absolutely benefit, it is unlikely amenities such as underground parking at \$35,000 per stall will be brought online. That is especially true given that most of the buildings in the corridor have a lot of economic life left in them.

Mr. Stroh agreed that the Eastgate/I-90 corridor is not the same as the Bel-Red corridor where extensive demolition of existing buildings can be expected and sites completely redeveloped. Most of the Eastgate/I-90 study area is covered with recent development that has 20 to 30 years of useful life left. There will be some redevelopment of sites, but primarily new development will take the form of infill. It will take carefully sculpted moves to encourage the kind of reinvestment desired in the area, the feasibility of which will be influenced by macroeconomic factors facing the city.

Mr. Bergstrom briefly reviewed the No Action alternative with the Committee. He noted that site on which the RV park is currently situated was previously highlighted as converting to a heavy retail use. The owner, however, has stated that for various reasons that use is not realistic for the property, so the alternative will show administrative office instead, more as a placeholder than anything else. He also commented that staff had gone round and round trying to forecast the potential for new office square footage in the study area under the No Action alternative. On May 5 the figure of 200,000 square feet was stated; after carefully reviewing the data, staff believes that number is fairly accurate.

John Owen with Makers Architecture and Urban Design then described the changes that had been made to Alternatives 1, 2, and 3 following the May 5 CAC meeting. Mr. Owen reminded the Committee that the focus of Alternative 1 is the core area around the transit station. The alternative emphasizes a walkable and highly livable mix of uses, including residential. The group that reviewed the alternative indicated it would like to see bike lanes and a sidewalk added on Eastgate Way. The scheme embraces more intensity, but Bellevue College expressed a desire to retain some visibility from the freeway and to

improve trail access to and from the campus for those students who would work in the mixed use area where the development will be at its densest. The group also envisioned areas with a moderately intense mix of uses, largely residential over commercial, and in the northwest corner moderate-intensity housing featuring sustainable development and restoration of the stream corridor. The Richards Valley area would retain its industrial character.

Mr. Owen said some changes were suggested for Alternative 2 as well. The group felt the office focus area should be spread linearly along the corridor, including the auto dealership site. The group wanted the office uses to include commercial uses along with them to accommodate services and ancillary facilities. A green connection should be created to serve the office areas and connect with the Factoria area. The group saw benefit to upgrading the industrial area, functionally tying it to Bellevue College, and enhancing the stream corridors and wetlands. They encouraged the inclusion of retail services around the transit center and near the office area along 150th Avenue SE; a medium intensity mix of uses in the Factoria area; and utilizing the 150th Avenue SE interchange as a gateway with landscaping that would support the office campus character.

Alternative 3 has a much more modest scale of change. It focuses on the features the community is most interested in and adds functionality to the area to make it a better place to live and work. It includes a greater mix of uses. The group stressed the need for good connections. Some concern was expressed about showing big box retail in the area to the west of the transit center; their preference was to show in on the Albertsons site or the auto dealership site. There was agreement to retain the concept in the alternative so it can be modeled. The alternative was envisioned as being more naturalistic with natural habitat in the freeway cloverleaf areas.

Mr. Bergstrom shared with the CAC a chart comparing the square footage of office, retail, institutional and industrial uses, and the number of housing units and hotel rooms for the different alternatives with the existing conditions. He noted that each of the three action alternatives emphasizes something different; Alternative 1 has the most new residential, Alternative 2 has the highest level of new office square footage, and Alternative 3 has the most retail. Because of where the residential is shown to occur, Alternative 1 actually results in a reduction in the amount of industrial square footage. All three action alternatives and the No Action alternative all show 280,000 square feet of institutional use, a figure taken directly from the Bellevue College master plan.

Mr. Ludtka suggested that one of the action alternatives should show an increase beyond 280,000 square feet for institutional use just so it can be modeled. Ms. Solemsaas said the problem is that the college campus simply cannot handle more square footage than that.

Co-Chair Hamlin suggested that Alternative 2, which focuses primarily on business in the corridor, should include more hotel rooms. Alternative 3 should include some hotel rooms as well.

4. Public Comment

Mr. Jack McCullough, 701 5th Avenue, Seattle, suggested that the market report actually understates the 20-year demand for office in the corridor. He proposed avoiding designing a result to the market report. The I-90 market has been one of the strongest office markets in the Puget Sound region for a long time. In order to trigger changes in the study area, it will be absolutely necessary to increase land values, and the way to

increase land value is to increase the allowed FAR. Once that decision is made, the question becomes how the increased density should be arranged in terms of height and bulk. Taller buildings tend to free up space at the ground level, and that is what can result in very attractive high-quality places to live and work. Shorter buildings avoid the impacts of height, but they are massive in terms of human scale and far less openness at the ground level. Buildings with very large floor plates attract a different kind of employer; they have less light and air and a much different overall character. The quality that taller buildings bring with them will be far more desirable.

Mr. Neil Fujii with King County Solid Waste Division, 201 South Jackson Street, Suite 700, Seattle, stated that the county, as part of redevelopment of the transfer station, will be exploring the possible construction of a pedestrian trail along the Olympic pipeline easement. The opportunity exists to connect it to SE 30th Street, thus improving connectivity within the corridor.

5. Draft Alternatives – Further Discussion/Revisions

Mr. Stokes suggested that on Alternative 2 the location shown as a hotel should be shown as mixed use instead, possibly a grocery store.

Ms. Bruce asked if the Mountains-to-Sound Greenway trail is necessarily going to serve as the primary bicycle trail through the study area, or if there could be a way to have a bike route on both sides of the freeway, one of which would be on the Mountains-to-Sound Greenway. Mr. Loewenherz responded that the 2009 ped-bike plan includes a comprehensive look at gaps throughout the city. There are over 400 projects referenced in the document, and it depicts the Mountains-to-Sound Greenway trail as being located on the south side of I-90. The plan includes bike lanes on Eastgate Way.

Ms. Solemsaas suggested that while the Bellevue College campus itself might be constrained, if the college is intended to serve as the business incubator it might make sense to include more institutional use square footage to one of the alternatives. It could be that the additional square footage could be achieved by allowing more building height on the site. There was consensus to add a little to Alternative 1 but far more to Alternative 2.

Mr. Pucher referenced the bridge at 142nd Avenue SE and the need to increase accessibility from both sides of the freeway. He asked what could be done to the bridge to improve access. Mr. Bergstrom said Alternative 1 assumes some expansion of the bridge. Mr. Loewenherz added that some modest improvements could be made to make it more user friendly, such as installing a canopy over the sidewalk. Retrofitting the bridge would be expensive but certainly is doable.

Transportation Planning Manager Kevin O'Neill pointed out that Alternative 1 depends on major improvements to the bridge. It connects major land uses, but it also serves as the crossover point for the Mountains-to-Sound Greenway.

Mr. Stokes said he would welcome seeing an alternative at the extreme opposite end from the No Action alternative, one that would in essence add everything together from the three action alternatives. Mr. Bergstrom commented that ultimately the CAC likely will pick and choose elements from each of the alternatives when formulating the preferred alternative.

Mr. Perea said he would like more information regarding building height. He asked how high the city would allow a building to be in the corridor and what transitions might be

required. Co-Chair Hamlin said the options presented by staff represent what could conceptually happen in the study area. At the open house the public will be able to comment on the height issue, and then the CAC will begin the process of refining the alternatives.

Mr. Bergstrom said there are a number of factors that influence height and density, including the market, the topography, environmental factors, the transportation network, and community acceptance. The Council did not give specific policy direction on specific heights or building styles. As certain levels of square footage or employment are assumed, they will need to be translated into bulk and mass.

Ms. Solemsaas proposed adding to Alternative 2 and Alternative 3 visual access to Bellevue College from I-90. Mr. Ludtka pointed out that each alternative was deliberately designed differently in order to generate public comment.

Mr. Stokes commented that the changes made to each of the alternatives tended to make them all more similar. He said he would prefer going to the open house with the three alternatives as originally drawn.

There was agreement to retain the big box retail scenario in Alternative 3 but to move it to Sunset Village.

6. Next Steps – June Open Houses, CAC Meeting

Mr. Bergstrom said there will be two open house events on June 1: One at the Robinswood House Cabana and the other at Eastgate Elementary School cafeteria. The public will be asked to indicate their preference for the alternatives, but an attempt will also be made to extract what it is they like or dislike about the alternatives.

The CAC agreed to schedule its next meeting for June 16. It was further agreed that there would be no meetings in July or August and to meet again on September 8.

7. Adjourn

Co-Chair Hamlin adjourned the meeting at 7:19 p.m.